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ABSTRACT

The current national focus on critical thinking is unnecessarily narrow in its scope, and this mitigates against essential changes being made in the thinking and reasoning activities experienced by students. Two shortcomings, however, restrict the possibilities for change: the first results from taking a generic (versus discipline-based) view of critical thinking that focuses on broad reasoning behaviors used in a variety of situations. The second shortcoming is that, historically, the field of education has taken a one dimensional, logical/scientific view of critical thought, one that erases from the consciousness of educators a literary understanding. From a reader-response perspective, literature instruction should focus on exploring multiple perspectives and fostering a broader sense of the interpretations of others. A reader-based theory for the teaching of literature can refocus instructional goals and practices. A literary orientation for critical thinking involves the exploration of a "horizon of possibilities," including motives, emotions, and relationships. This orientation should consist of the following: (1) students are treated as thinkers; (2) literature reading is treated as question generating; and (3) class meetings are treated as a time to develop understandings. Such meetings allow students room to work through ideas in a variety of contexts, thus playing a critical role in intellectual development. Literary understanding has its place next to informative understanding as a necessary component of critical thought and intelligent literate behavior. Educators must rethink the role of English language arts in the total curriculum. (Forty-one references are attached.) (HB)

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Critical Thinking and English Language Arts Instruction

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Critical Thinking and English Language Arts Instruction

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In this paper I argue that the current national focus on critical thinking is unnecessarily narrow in its scope, and that this mitigates against essential changes being made in the thinking and reasoning activities students in the nation's schools will have the opportunity to experience. I see two shortcomings that restrict possibilities for change, one imposing boundaries on how we apply what we already know, another limiting our very conceptualization of critical thought.

The first and easier shortcoming to deal with, results from taking a generic (versus discipline-based) view of critical thinking that focuses on broad reasoning behaviors which can be invoked in a wide variety of situations. I admit that we can identify broad thinking strategies that cut across the disciplines and that identification of these strategies is useful in understanding general thinking behaviors. However, I argue that these general behaviors are called upon and operate in particular ways based upon what counts as knowing and what counts as acceptable presentation and argument within a particular discipline, and that successful reasoning within the academic subjects requires adherence to those disciplinary differences. Following a discipline-specific focus, a good deal of recent writing research and theory has focused on the notion of disciplinary communities and the properties of language and thought that are sanctioned by one community versus another (see, for example Bazerman, 1982; Berkenkotter, 1988; Herrington, 1985; Langer & Applebee, 1988; McCarthy, 1987; and North, 1986). These studies affirm that there are patterns of differences in the types of evidence as well as in the ways of organizing discourse that mark "successful" entrance into and communication within particular fields. Thus, although such "critical thinking" behaviors as questioning and analyzing are invoked in science and in English classes, the reasons for invoking them and the ends to which they are put, differ in marked and identifiable ways. For example, in biology and physics classes, questions seem to be asked primarily for clarification of the unknown (for explication), while in English, questions are often used to explore possible interpretations (for investigation) (Langer & Applebee, 1988; Langer, 1990a; Langer, Confer & Sawyer, in progress).

A more general approach to critical thinking is prevalent in many curriculum guides and instructional programs, manifesting itself either as separate course offerings in critical thinking or as the presentation of a set of generalized thinking "objectives" that are supposed to be adapted by teachers to meet particular course needs. Volumes such as this one attempt to address issues of discipline-specificity, moving us toward a better understanding of the differences in disciplinary approaches to thought that must underlie effective educational reform.

My second concern is that, historically, the field of education has taken a one dimensional view of critical thought, defining its properties as those of logical/scientific thought. In doing so, I fear the field has unwittingly erased from the consciousness of educators another essential aspect of human reasoning and problem solving, another highly productive avenue to sense-making -- what I call literary understanding.

Across the years, distinctions have been made between literary and scientific ways of thinking (e.g., Britton, 1970, 1983; Bruner, 1986, 1990; S. Langer, 1942, 1967), suggesting that together they

represent the multiple ways of making sense that people draw upon when constructing meaning. In this tradition, we have heard such distinctions as subjective and objective realities, aesthetic and logical thinking, creative and scientific reasoning, and narrative and paradigmatic thought. Each set of distinctions focuses on at least two approaches to reasoning that are available within the human consciousness. One is more inward, focusing on personal meanings, understandings of human situations, and the complex web of relationships embedded in them. The other is more distant, focusing outside of the individual's personal life-world, on texts and situations as they relate to each other. (See Langer, 1990a,b for a fuller discussion.) The important point is that this work views literary experience as a natural and necessary part of the well-developed intellect -- different from but as valued as scientific or logical experience.

But educational research and practice has focused almost all its concern on one kind of reasoning, the kind represented by the traditional domain of logic. Wrongly so, I think, since there is growing evidence from a number of fields, that the processes involved in understanding literature are also productive in dealing with everyday problems of life and work. For example, studies have shown that doctors (Elstein, Shulman & Sprafka, 1978), lawyers (Putnam, 1978), and computer repairers (Orr, 1987a,b) use both forms of reasoning to solve problems. These studies describe ways in which professionals who usually take a "logical" approach to problem solving productively turn to "storytelling" to help them work through difficult problems and develop possible solutions.

However, we have ample evidence that across the United States, literature is too often taught in a non-literary manner, with the kinds of productive thinking involved in such "storytelling" never taught, rarely noticed, and sometimes suppressed. And this is largely due to the fact that the processes underlying literary thinking have been largely unexplored, and connections between such thinking and the goals and processes of instruction have barely been made.

The time is ripe for substantive reform of English language arts education. The cognitive revolution in educational research has changed our conceptualizations of teaching and learning in general and the goals of reading and writing instruction in particular from product alone (from the facts students are taught and are expected to learn) to the processes involved in students' constructing, rethinking and elaborating upon their understandings. But there has been relatively little research into the cognitive and communicative processes involved in either the learning or teaching of literature. When people think of literature instruction at all, they generally think of the content; literature education is generally considered a way to lead students into the cultural knowledge, aesthetic judgments, and high culture of society. However, literature's role in the development of the sharp and literate mind -- its role in reasoning and higher literacy -- is generally ignored.

Changes in literature education will be nontrivial, requiring the replacement of a long-lived traditional set of theoretical underpinnings with a new and less familiar framework. I say this because if we are going to make any substantive change in literature education, in what students learn and how they learn it, then we are going to need to replace an older set of theoretical beliefs and pragmatic behaviors, based upon New Critical theory and behaviorist pedagogy, with those based on reader response theories and sociocognitive pedagogy. Deeply embedded in the tradition of the English language arts is a text-based set of beliefs and behaviors guiding instructional goals, decisions, interactions, and evaluations-- derived from the New Critical theory (e.g., Brooks, 1947; Welleck & Warren, 1949) that strongly changed English education in the 1960s. This now-traditional view called for close readings of texts, with particular emphasis on the narrator, the point of view, and the "correct" interpretation. Among other things, this view led to the assumption in planning instruction that contemplating, analyzing, and theorizing about a piece comes about only <u>after</u> students know the facts --"what happened" to whom. Thus, traditional lessons generally begin with a "quick check" - a plot summary and a beginning-to-end retracing to be sure the "facts" are known. The New Critical approach as it was applied in schools also led to the belief that there are common images, evocations,

and responses to a literary piece that all good readers experience; thus traditional English lessons move toward consensus. It also suggested that there are certain approved interpretations of particular phrases, lines, or themes that the intelligent and well-read student should know -- and therefore these approved interpretations need to be learned. This led to instructional goals that focused on the learning of particular interpretations, and of convergent ways of thinking so that students would eventually reach those interpretations on their own. In short, such traditional views rely on hierarchical notions of complexity, on text-based notions of comprehension, and on the teacher or field as knowledge-holder. English language arts educators have acquired these views through socialization into the field during their own coursework and have had them reinforced by the accoutrements of the field -- by the materials, tests, and evaluation practices that accompany English teaching.

A number of reader-response theories provide alternatives to the New Criticism (e.g., Bleich, 1978; Holland, 1975; Iser, 1974, 1978; Langer, 1990a, 1991b; Rosenblatt, 1938; 1978; Tompkins, 1980). Although the various reader-response theories differ in their emphases and often lead to heated debate among their proponents, as a group they are compatible with recent views of reading, writing, and learning. All regard readers as active meaning makers with personal knowledge, beliefs and experiences that affect responses and interpretations -- thus creating the potential for more than one "correct" interpretation. From a reader-response perspective, effective instruction focuses on exploring multiple perspectives, on arriving at a broader base of knowledge from which interpretations can be developed and enriched, on sensitivity to others' well-defended views, on expectations that convincing arguments will differ based on who the people are -- both the readers and their audience -- and that good defenses need not always move others to agree, but do offer additional complexity to others' understandings. Despite the fact that reader-based theories have been of intellectual concern to a growing number of university scholars (primarily in English departments, with a growing number in English education departments as well), they have for the most part remained intellectual theories; they have yet to become conceptualized as pedagogical theories that can work their way into teachers' bones -- providing the words and images and beliefs about what counts as good thinking and learning and guiding teachers on an everyday basis as they interact with students about the works they read.

For the past few years, through my work at the National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning (funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Research, Office of Educational Research and Improvement), I have been working toward a reader-based theory for the teaching of literature -- one that can help us understand what it means to make sense of literature from a reader's point of view, and what that means to the refocusing or our instructional goals and practices (see Langer, 1990a,b,c; Langer, 1991b, Langer, in press-a,in press-b,in press-c; Roberts & Langer, 1991). One part of this work helps explain the process of literary understanding while the other addresses ways in which such understanding can be most effectively taught. I will discuss each in turn.

The Process of Literary Understanding

My work suggests that for pedagogical purposes it is unproductive to conceptualize critical thinking in general terms. In fact, there are basic distinctions in the ways readers (and writers) orient themselves toward making sense when engaging in the activity for literary or informational purposes. In both cases readers have a sense of the local meaning they are considering at the moment, and also an overall sense of the whole meaning they are reading, writing, or thinking about, but they orient themselves differently to the ideas they are creating because their expectations about the kinds of meaning they will gain or create are different.

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Horizon of Possibilities

A literary orientation involves "living through the experience." It can be characterized as exploring a horizon of possibilities. It explores emotions, relationships, motives and reactions, calling on all we know about what it is to be human. For example, once we read and think we understand that Romeo and Juliet really love each other, we may begin to question how their parents would really feel about their relationship if they took the time to understand its depth, and this begins to reshape our understanding of the entire play. And then as we read on, we might begin to question whether Romeo and Juliet are bigger-than-life tragic figures, with their destiny somehow controlled by forces beyond even their parents' control -- more so when we try to make sense of Juliet's decision to die. How, we ponder, could someone have prevented this from occurring?

Even when we finish reading, we rethink our interpretations -- perhaps at one time taking a psychological and at other times a political and at still other times a mythic stance toward the characters' feelings and actions. Thus, throughout the reading (and even after we have closed the book) our ideas constantly shift and swell. Possibilities arise and multiple interpretations come to mind, expanding the complexity of our understandings.

In a literary experience, reading proceeds at two levels; on the one hand people consider new ideas in terms of their sense of the whole, but they also use their new ideas to reconsider the whole as well. There is an ever-emerging "horizon of possibilities" that enriches the reader's understanding. Readers clarify ideas as they read and relate them to the growing whole; the whole informs the parts as well as the parts building toward the whole. In a literary experience, readers also continually try to go beyond the information. From the moment they begin reading, they orient themselves toward exploring possibilities -- about the characters, situations, settings, and actions -- and the ways in which they interrelate. Readers also think beyond the particular situation, using their text understandings to reflect on their own lives, on the lives of others, or on human situations and conditions in general. In doing this, they expand their breadth of understanding, leaving room for alternative interpretations, changing points of view, complex characterizations, and unresolved questions -- questions that underlie the ambiguity inherent in the interpretation of literature.

Thus a literary orientation is one of exploring horizons -- where uncertainty is a normal part of response and new-found understandings provoke still other possibilities. It involves a great deal of critical thought, but it is different from the kinds of thinking students engage in for their other academic coursework, where the focus is primarily on the acquisition of particular information (whether that information is cast as memorization of low level "facts" or the understanding of complex theories and arguments).

Point of Reference

When the purpose of reading is primarily to gain information (as when students read science and social studies texts), the reader's orientation can be characterized as "maintaining a point of reference." In this orientation toward meaning, from early on, readers (and writers) attempt to establish a sense of the topic or point being made (or to be made in their own writing). Once established, this sense of the whole becomes a relatively steady reference point. Unlike the frequent reconsiderations of the possibilities done during a literary reading, in this case, students attempt to build upon, clarify, or modify their momentary understandings -- but rarely change their overall sense of the topic. Their sense of the whole changes only when a substantial amount of countervailing evidence leads them to rethink how what they are reading or writing "holds together."

There is, thus, an essential difference between the two orientations toward meaning, a difference that can have a substantive effect on our understanding of critical thinking in education. While questions are raised in both literary and informative approaches to understanding, it is the ways in which the questions are asked -- where they emanate from and how they are treated -- that mark the essential distinctions.

The exploration of horizons of possibilities lies at the heart of a literary experience. Here, use of the word "horizon" is critical, referring to the fact that horizons are never stationary but continually move; so that whenever a person (reader) takes a step towards the horizon (moving toward closure), the horizon itself shifts (and other possibilities are revealed for the reader to explore). Continually raising questions about the implications and undersides of what one understands (and using those musings to reconstrue where the piece might go) precludes closure and invites ambiguity.

It can be argued that questions are at the heart of point of reference thinking as well, and this is certainly the case. However, the reasons why those questions are asked differ, thus affecting the individual's cognitive orientation. For example, scientific researchers always consider their studies to be best if their initial questions lead to other questions -- research is as much to generate questions as to uncover answers. However, the underlying purpose of the researcher's questions is to narrow the gap between what is known and what is not about a field of inquiry, to move toward some form of closure, although true closure rarely occurs; it generally is yet another question that will help move thinking along. Thus, although "full" knowledge may never be reached, and successive questions may sometimes seem to muddy rather than elucidate what is known, the far off goal is the explication of knowledge. Here is the essential difference from literary orientation, where it is the musing itself is the goal.

Although I have been discussing the two orientations toward meaning in extreme terms, as if they were dichotomous, neither orientation operates completely independent of the other. Instead, as suggested earlier, together they provide alternative ways of sense-making that can be called upon when needed. Although both purposes, literary and informative, generally interplay in a variety of ways during any one experience, each situation seems to have a primary purpose, with the others being secondary. For example, when writing a paper providing important historical details on the Gulf War (involving an informative orientation), a student might momentarily slip into a literary orientation, in describing the day to day life experiences of a member of an oil clean-up crew or of a woman soldier who had to leave her newborn when called up from the reserves -- although most of the paper presents details and commentary on the war itself. Conversely, when writing from a literary orientation about a soldier or clean-up crew member (by portraying the personal lived-through experiences of the people, their relationships -- their joys and tragedies) the student may at times "step out" of the living text she or he is creating and momentarily assume an informative orientation in order to provide specific and accurate information about the details of the bombings, or the world's reaction to Saddam's dumping oil into the Gulf. In each case, it is the primary purpose that shapes the student's overall orientation to the shape of the piece, but it is the interplay of the two that can add richness to the understanding that results.

However, research indicates that literature is usually taught and tested in a nonliterary manner, as if there is one right answer arrived at through point of reference reading or writing. Arthur Applebee's Literature Center study of English classes across the United States (1990) indicates that literature is often taught as if there were a point or predetermined interpretation the reader must build toward, or as a literal reworking of the plot line from start to finish -- with no room for students' explorations to be sanctioned or to take form.

Similarly, in history classes (Langer, in preparation), even where the goal is to introduce literature into the curriculum, literary narratives are often used exclusively to gather information. For example, students are rarely given the opportunity to "live through" the polar expeditions of the arctic explorer or to "feel" the living conditions described by William Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, Nadine Gordimer, Ann Frank, or Athol Fugard, and therefore to explore the possibilities involved in the worlds they create.

The same too often also holds true in "literature-based" primary grade classes (Walmsley & Walp, 1989) where trade book stories are basalized, with detail questions retracing the story line instead of using students' shared questions and developing interpretations as the primary focus of the lesson.

Alan Purves' studies at the Literature Center (e.g., Brody, DeMilo, & Purves, 1989) indicate that literature tests (in anthologies, statewide assessments, SAT's, and achievement tests of all sorts) treat literature as content, with a factual right answer rather than with possibilities to ponder and interpretations to develop, question and defend. His favorite multiple choice literature question, typical of those in many large scale assessment tests, is: "Huck Finn is a good boy. True or False." Such items call for superficial readings rather than thoughtful interpretations, or the weighing of alternative views.

My own work (Langer & Applebee, 1988; Langer, in press-a; Langer, Confer, Sawyer, in progress) suggests we have been conceiving of "knowing" and the processes of knowing too narrowly, not only in English language arts, but in other academic areas as well, basing both instruction and assessment on a narrow notion of facts as evidence of knowing and on the assumption that point of reference thinking is the cognitive orientation to be sought, practiced, and validated. In contrast, my studies indicate that both horizon of possibilities and point of reference thinking have their place in history, social studies, biology and physics as well as in English classes, and that the two orientations toward understanding interact in productive ways, providing students with alternative vantage points from which to approach problems and build fuller understandings.

However, although both kinds of thinking occurred in all the academic classes I have studied, they occurred in different amounts and served different purposes based both on the particular subject and on how it was taught. For example, as would be expected, exploring a horizon of possibilities occurred most often in English classes, particularly when students stepped into the literature they were reading and when discussion was treated as time to go beyond initial understandings and consider multiple perspectives as part of the process of developing interpretations. However, point of reference thinking also occurred in English classes; it occurred most often either when students dipped down to explore a particular issue from a particular point of view, to clarify confusion, or to learn particular information from what they were reading. It also occurred in English classes when one particular interpretation was considered acceptable and the students held this as the endpoint of meaning (this was particularly so in traditionally taught English classes). English classes often began with a horizon of possibility, inviting students to share their initial impressions by describing their current understandings, concerns, and questions. Such classes often ended with horizons of possibility thinking as well, leaving the students with the notion that multiple interpretations are to be expected and that ambiguity and reconsideration are at the heart of literary thinking.

Although horizon of possibilities thinking is evident in social studies and science classes, this orientation seems to be used by teachers primarily as motivation, before the students are to get down to work. For example, in the classrooms I studied, before laboratory experiments were begun, students were sometimes asked to explore possibilities such as "What would you think if ...?" But such questions were rarely asked after experiments for the exploration of alternative causes or explanations. Horizon of possibility thinking was also often used during lessons to "pull" students back into thinking

about the topic at hand, particularly when their attention wandered. In the science, social studies, and history classes, point of reference thinking was almost always at the heart of the lesson, with a concept or set of information to be learned or thought about in a certain way. Alternative interpretations were rarely sought in science, while in social studies a debate model was sometimes used, requiring the students to look at an issue from two often dichotomous and predetermined perspectives.

However, students in these classes used horizon of possibility thinking more often than their teachers invited -- in seemingly productive ways. When they worked in groups with other students, when they read and thought alone, and also when they discussed certain issues, we saw them exploring possibilities as they considered alternative explanations and interpretations, when they went about trying to solve a problem at hand, or when they were simply stuck and spun imaginary scenarios in an attempt to move on. However, because this kind of thinking was not considered productive, when it did come to the teacher's attention (e.g., as a student-posed question), it generally received a benign nod or was ignored.

Thus, although both orientations toward understanding seem to be called upon in various ways either by students or teachers, the field of education has yet to consider how these differing orientations can be used as tools of instruction to help students think more richly and deeply about their coursework and to help them become stronger thinkers and problem solvers in general.

What Does This Mean for Literature Instruction?

For the past four years I have also been studying what the process of understanding literature means for rethinking our notions of literature instruction, identifying ways in which English language arts classrooms can become environments that encourage students to arrive at their own understandings, explore possibilities, and move beyond their initial understandings toward more thoughtful interpretations.

Over time, I and ten Research Assistants from the Center (who are all experienced teachers), with more than forty teachers from a diverse group of suburban and city schools have been working collaboratively to find ways to help students engage in the critical and creative thinking that literature can provoke -- to arrive at their own responses, explore possibilities, and move beyond initial understandings toward more thoughtful interpretations. We have been studying the classrooms carefully, analyzing the lessons that work, noting how the classrooms change over time, and coming to understand what underlies contexts where rich thinking occurs.

We have learned that there are characteristic ways in which students make sense of literary pieces, and that the role of the teacher is central to the ways in which students think, talk about, and formulate their understandings and interpretations of the pieces they read. This work has permitted me to identify several principles of instruction that permeate the social fabric of classrooms that encourage students to explore possibilities (see Langer, 1990b, 1991a, in press-b, in press-c, and in progress) for further discussion.

1. Students are treated as thinkers.

Students are treated as if they can and will have interesting and cogent thoughts about the pieces they read, and also have questions they would like to discuss. Teachers give students ownership for the topics of discussion or writing, making students' growing understandings the central focus of each class meeting. (In traditional classes, acceptable interpretations are already in the teachers' minds

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and the students are expected to match them. In such environments, students think about how to get the right answer, not how to think through their own ideas.)

The following are examples of the types of questions teachers used to stimulate thinking for discussion or writing:

T. What did you think about when you finished reading the story?
T. What does the piece mean to you?
T. Is there any part you think will be interesting to discuss?

Requiring students to present their initial impressions is an important aspect of reader response or response-based instruction. Prompted in this way, students are invited to begin with their initial impressions, to raise questions, to introduce possibilities, to hear others, and to think beyond as they develop and enrich their interpretations.

Written assignments such as logs, brief writing activities, informal letters, and written conversations in addition to more formal reviews, essays and analytic papers were also used to encourage students to reflect on, state, defend, and rethink their initial impressions. Particular assignments varied from teacher to teacher; the following examples will give a sense of the underlying emphases. In some classrooms, students were encouraged to keep literature journals, and also to use them on a regular basis during class discussions, small group meetings and when they wrote. These were often used as the basis for small group discussions, written conversations or whole class discussions. The students were also encouraged to use their journals to check on their own understanding. For example, one teacher said: "Make a prediction in your journal when you put the book down. Check it later to see if that happened."

In each case, the continual focus on students' developing understandings, writing about them, discussing them, and refining them, offered ways in which students were encouraged to realize that acceptable behavior in literature class requires students to participate as involved thinkers.

2. Literature reading is treated as question generating.

Teachers who support the development of students' literary understandings assume that after reading a piece, readers come away with questions as well as understandings, and that responding to literature involves the raising of "exploring horizons" questions. Thus, teachers continually invite students' questions -- in writing and in discussion. These questions focus on motives, relationships, feelings -- on the human experiences that are "read into" texts but never stated. They are the "gaps" that readers need to fill in for themselves. Writers often purposely leave these gaps to "invite" readers into the piece, and critical thinking in literature involves exploring possible ways to fill these gaps and how such possibilities might affect other parts of the readers' growing text worlds.

Stepping in and exploring possibilities is part of the joy of the literary experience. It is also at the root of the ambiguity that makes the literature lesson distinct from information-getting lessons. For example, in "real life" after seeing a movie or reading a book, we might say, "I really liked it, but how did those two ever get together?" "What did they see in each other?" Thus begins a literature discussion where the participants may reexamine their initial interpretations and engage in critical thinking.

In more traditional classrooms, having questions signifies that a student doesn't know (the right answer) and therefore question-asking is avoided by students, even when the teacher asks "Does anyone have any questions? Anything you didn't understand?" However, in the contexts of

classrooms that support literary understanding, questions are considered a desirable behavior, indicating that students who ponder and explore uncertainties are behaving as good readers of literature.

3. Class meetings are treated as a time to develop understandings.

In traditional classes, class meeting is a time for the teacher to check on what the students have understood and as a time for repair -- to help them fill in what they didn't "get." Students' solitary reading experiences (whether for homework or in class) are considered the times when ideas become fully formed, reaching an endpoint to be recited and checked in class. In contrast, when classes involve literary understanding, teachers treat the reading that students have done as the starting place for exploring further possibilities. Class meetings become times when students are expected to share their provisional understandings and then to individually and collectively participate in reworking their interpretations, raising questions, making connections and gaining deeper understandings.

For example, during a discussion of "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin, the teacher began the lesson by asking, "What did you think about at the end - when you finished reading?" The students discussed their surprise that, in contrast to what they expected, the husband was alive and the wife dead, and then focused on the wife's apparent joy when she was told (incorrectly) that her husband had been killed in a train crash. To help the students consider multiple perspectives and let their understanding of the complexity of the piece build, some of the questions the teacher asked over two days were:

> "Did you always think of it this way? When did you realize it would be this way? Why? Could others interpret this piece another way? How? Did anything in the piece remind you of something you've read or experienced in your own life? What? How did it affect your understanding of the piece? How might this piece be interpreted by a Freudian psychologist? A feminist spokesperson? Some people consider this an important feminist literary work. Can you imagine why? Now, read about the author's life. What does that contribute to a feminist interpretation of the piece? Based on our discussions, you may have had a chance to rethink your initial understandings. Write your ideas about the piece now, and tell why. Use evidence from the story, from Kate Chopin's life, and from your own life's experience and reading to explain your interpretation. Then we will discuss not only your views, but how well they stand up to argument."

In these lessons, it was quite clear to both the teacher and the students that ideas change during literary discussions and that class meetings are the times to explore multiple interpretations, to challenge one's own as well as others' ideas, and to reach a fuller understanding of the complexities of the piece. It was also clear that although there was no single appropriate way to interpret the piece, close analysis would separate the several acceptable interpretations from those that were less defensible. Further, the students came to realize that becoming aware of differing interpretations enriched their understanding of the piece -- an understanding that might well continue to grow and develop even after their study of the piece had ended.

This is far different from traditional classrooms that treat class meetings as a time to check on what the students didn't understand, and spend the rest of the time "filling in" what they "didn't get."

In general, then, when these principles characterize the instructional environment, students are supported to explore, rethink, explain, and defend their own understandings. They begin with their own initial impressions, and use writing and discussion as well as further reading to ponder and refine their developing interpretations. The social structure of the class calls for (and expects) the thoughtful participation of all students, the teacher assumes that there will be multiple interpretations to be discussed and argued, and the students learn that horizons of possibilities that are pondered and defended characterize the ways of thinking that are sought.

Toward Meaningful Reform

In the classrooms I have described, students are given room to work through their ideas in a variety of contexts: in whole class discussion, alone, and in groups -- in reading, writing, and speaking. Developing envisionments, exploring them, talking about them, and refining understandings underlay the very fabric of how the class works. Although codified interpretations and particular points of view are discussed and considered, they are usually introduced and analyzed only after the students have had an opportunity to explore their own interpretations. Such analysis involves confronting, reexploring and possibly interweaving, refining, or changing their own interpretations. Thus, students are able to react to others' ideas (including established interpretations) through the lens of their own considered understandings as well as the understandings of others -- reaching interpretations which continue to be treated conditionally, always subject to further development. In instructional settings like this, that treat all students like thinkers and provide the environment as well as the help to do this, even "at risk" students can engage in thoughtful discussions about literature, develop rich and deep understandings, and enjoy it too.

What does all this suggest for educational reform? Clearly there are implications not only for literature classes, but other coursework as well. First, it means that literary understanding will need to be granted its place next to informative understanding as a necessary component of critical thought and intelligent literate behavior -- an essential goal of schooling. What counts as knowing and reasoning will therefore need to change, to focus on students' growing abilities to engage in the act of literary understanding as well as their knowledge of the content. This will bring about the expanded view of critical thought I argued for in the introduction to this chapter -- validating the essential role that both literary and logical thought play in human consciousness, and ensuring that together they are placed at the center of pedagogical and curriculum concerns.

It also means that the conception of English language arts coursework across the grades will need to change. The English language arts need to be seen as having a critical role in the intellectual development of school children, as being the primary (though not exclusive) part of schooling where the processes of literary understanding are taught and developed. Thus, the goals, interactions, and lesson structures in English classes will need to emphasize the tapping of initial interpretations, the exploration of possibilities, the development and reshaping of interpretations and the assumption of critical stances as characterizing thought-provoking instruction.

It also means that we will need to rethink the contribution of literature instruction to the overall curriculum -- and how the ways of understanding literature may in turn influence students' abilities to understand and solve problems in other coursework. This of course suggests that literary texts will need to be used in a literary manner -- in ways that invite students into the lives and times and emotions and situations depicted in the works they read--, but also that the processes of literary understanding will need to be treated as viable and productive ways to approach and think through course material on a daily basis, as a way to facilitate new learning and enhance already acquired understandings (e.g., what seems indefensible today might be quite defensible tomorrow).

Such notions underlie a pedagogical framework for curriculum and instruction that focuses more on the purposes to which different approaches toward thinking are applied than on a hierarchy of the thinking skills themselves. For example, from this viewpoint, the kinds of questions students are asked in all coursework will need to differ when reading, writing or discussing primarily for literary or primarily for informative purposes, focusing on the possibilities students need to consider on the one hand and on the content they come away with on the other. Ways will also need to be found to encourage rather than to inhibit students' idiosyncratic uses of the two approaches to sense making as they shift and flex in their searches for meaning -- with instruction helping them better understand how to gain control of and make choices regarding their relative contributions in particular situations. Thus, shifts will be needed in the pre-arranged lesson plans, assignments, materials, questions, and evaluations that form the foundation, shape and continuity of each course as well as in the ways these are reinforced in daily interactions with students. This will be part of the larger reconsideration about what we mean by good reading and good writing. The primary purpose for which students engage in a piece of writing -- to explore horizons of possibilities or to present information or ideas -- will need to inform notions of learning and knowing -- by teachers, by researchers, and by test developers.

In short, I have been arguing that in this time of focus on critical thinking in the academic subjects, we cannot treat literature as just another subject. Instead, we need to rethink the role of English language arts in the total curriculum. A national focus on science and mathematics as the place for instruction in critical thinking is restricted not only by a limited focus on subject areas but also in its conception of critical thinking.

While my comments suggest ways to rethink the teaching of literature and the role of literary understanding in other coursework, this does not mean that changes are not already taking place. Instead, my own recent work and the ideas presented here are reflective of the changing knowledge within the field and its potential contribution to the continual quest for improvement in education. For example, the United States Department of Education has, for the first period in history, provided substantial funds for a National Research Center on Literature Teaching and Learning, a number of states have organized centralized efforts toward reshaping literature instruction from a reader-based perspective (with the state of California going so far as to legislate direct funds to sustain the California Literature Project), the National Assessment of Educational Progress has reshaped its framework for the 1992 reading assessment to separate "reading for literary experience" from "reading for information," with different questions sensitive to the different purposes of the two aspects of literacy. NAEP has also created questions that prompt students to share initial understandings and develop their interpretations as well as to demonstrate a critical stance. Moves toward portfolio assessment at national, state and local levels are also attempting to focus on students' thoughtful engagement with their academic coursework, as are some textbook publishers. However, a unified way of conceptualizing the goals of literature education and its processes of instruction is not yet in place. This will require a major restructuring of our conceptualizations of what counts as knowing -- as well as how to teach it.

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